SUN-TIMES
BOOK WEEK

JFK's assassin? The dissenters sound off

By Richard J. Whalen

ACCESSORIES AFTER THE FACT: The Warren Commission, The Authorities & The Report. By Sylvia Meagher. Bobbs-Merrill. $8.50.

SIX SECONDS IN DALLAS: A Micro-Study of the Kennedy Assassination. By Josiah Thompson. Bernard Geis. $8.95.

Reading the transcript of the hearings of the Warren Commission, one is struck by how attentive the members were to the wild theorizing and publicity-seeking antics of the early dissenters. The fantasies of the expatriate leftist Tom Buchanan were solemnly noted and rebutted. Mark Lane was trailed around the country by FBI agents who reported fully on his harangues. Newspaper accounts of the unfolding investigation were carefully read. The commissioners wished to anticipate every challenge and answer every question in the document they were preparing for the ages — as, indeed, they were supposed to do.

They failed, of course, not least in their estimate of how their work would be received. Commissioners who are willing to talk privately about the investigation today seem astonished by the intensity of the criticism recently directed at them. The initial torrents of praise from an uninformed press gave these public servants a false sense of secure achievement. It is difficult to imagine how they and their influential admirers expected an implausible account of a profound national trauma to go unquestioned into the history books. But they did, and so did their anxious client in the White House.

In retrospect, the attempts during the hearings to anticipate the worst seem ludicrous. The worst situation was beyond the imaginations of the commissioners, and they unwittingly chose to bring it about by throwing open to the public an immense record. It consists of 26 printed volumes of hearings and exhibits, running to some 10,000,000 words, and thousands of cubic feet of unpublished reports and papers that are stored in the National Archives. Out of this vast sea of paper have poured almost a score of books critical of the commission's findings; not a single major conclusion has escaped more or less persuasive challenge. In barely two years, the Warren *Report* has plummeted from acceptance to disrepute, thanks chiefly to the open-handedness of the commission itself.

What, it may be asked, is wrong with such a situation? Surely officially endorsed "truth" ought to be subject to the most searching scrutiny. Indeed it should, but the great and growing tragedy of the situation, in which the commission's own evidence convincingly refutes it, is that we are in the presence of a void. Though the official version of the assassination has been discredited, its sponsors have left the scene. The commission's formal responsibility ended with publication of the *Report*. We are left with the main instrument of the investigation, the FBI, and the client, President Johnson, but painfully obvious considerations of self-interest argue against their assumption of responsibility.

The tactic of officialdom without responsibility, not surprisingly, is to preserve silence, keep sensitive documents locked up, and issue only self-serving statements when something must be said—e.g., FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's determinedly obtuse "explanation" of the basic conflict between the FBI and official accounts of the autopsy performed on

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President Kennedy's body. In these circumstances, the pleas of dissenters can only be addressed to the public at large, which, as the polls disclose, already harbors a deepening suspicion that sinister lies have been told.

Now we have a pair of new and formidable books that cannot help but harden doubts into suspicions. Sylvia Meagher may know more about the assassination than any other living person, and she has shared her knowledge unselfishly in a field thick with self-promoters. Because the Warren Commission unaccountably failed to do so, she undertook the monumental task of bringing order out of the chaotic jumble of the 26 volumes. Her *Subject Index* (Scrarecrow Press, 1966) is an indispensable tool and sufficient testimony to her disinterested scholarship.

In similar painstaking fashion, she now presents a volume of close analysis in which she draws together the key facts of every aspect of the assassination and then coolly appraises them. Her method cannot conceal a towering scorn for the sloppiness of the commission; its insults to the public's intelligence wound her personally. Yet she is not imprisoned by a fixed idea (as the commission all too obviously was) and she renders a distinct service by restoring lifelike ambiguities to the cut-and-dried narrative of the *Report*. Much of what she says is familiar by now; what is new is the depth of her inquiry. With her unique grasp of the material, she is able to pull together small but telling details that, seen in their true relationship, yield fresh insights. Every reader familiar with the controversy will be rewarded by her step-by-step pursuit of the truth; every newcomer will find what has been lacking in the critical literature—a sober, comprehensive summary.

Josiah Thompson's "micro-study" relies heavily on the use of photographs and charts, precisely the sort of graphic evidence that the commission, when it used it at all, used with almost incredible ineptitude. Prof. Thompson, who teaches philosophy at Haverford, identifies his book as a "third-generation" study of the assassination, in contrast to earlier works by conspiracy-mongers and all-out polemicists. Call it what he will, it is deeply disturbing. For it enlists the special power of pictures to drive home the point made repeatedly and much less forcefully in critical prose: a single assassin could not possibly have done all that the commission would have us believe Oswald did.

Thompson presents "an amalgam of hard fact and educated speculation" which suggests that *three* assassins fired *four* shots from *three* locations in Dealey Plaza. He introduces photographic evidence suggesting that two men (neither of whom was Oswald) may have been on the sixth floor of the Book Depository at the time of the shooting. He calls attention to an unidentified object in a picture showing the stockade fence on the grassy knoll, and suggests it may be the face of an assassin peering down his gun barrel at us. All this and more is startling, but it is advanced responsibility, in the tone of a reasonable man asking for a reasonable explanation of the evidence our eyes see. Does the camera lie . . . or did the commission?

Neither Miss Meagher nor Thompson comes to a firm conclusion concerning the guilt or innocence of Oswald, which is where their cause-pleading predecessors have so often gone astray. Carefully labeling her speculation as such, Miss Meagher spins a plausible theory of conspiracy involving anti-Castro Cubans and their right-wing American supporters, who had ample motivation to wish President Kennedy dead. But she sketches a possible outline of conspiracy only to show a plot *might* have succeeded in Dallas within the constraints of the evidence unearthed by the commission, which steadfastly clung to the lone-assassin theory. (It may be noted that Sen. Richard B. Russell declined to endorse the chief justice's proposed conclusion that no conspiracy existed; rather, Russell insisted the commission limit itself to saying it found no evidence of a plot—a very important difference.)

The crucial shortcoming in the commission's approach, it is now apparent, was to presume that it could act as its own adversary. However dedicated the members were to the discovery of the whole truth, they began with the fact of a dead accused, in whose direction a wealth of circumstantial evidence pointed. If someone, even the ineffable Lane, had been permitted to represent Oswald's interest, the facile compromises and rationalizations that made the commission so vulnerable might never have found their way into the *Report*. Certainly the basic question of whether a single bullet struck both President Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally would have been debated to some definite resolution, and not glossed over by a tortured exercise in semantic horse-trading.

The critics have succeeded not only in giving Oswald the hearing he deserved, dead or alive; they have also reversed the roles of the past and placed the commission at the bar of judgment. Authors such as Miss Meagher and Thompson (and others who will surely follow) can muster impressive evidence in support of an indictment that need not be made explicit: the commission failed so grossly to see what was so obvious that its motives must be suspected. The weight of that indictment falls heavily upon our institutions and our society. But who will answer it? The place at the bar is empty.

CHICAGO DAILY
SUN-TIMES

DEC 8 1967